MORALITY AND REVELATION IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND BEYOND

A New Problem of Evil

Amir Saemi

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Is he who was dead, then We gave him life, and made for him a light by which he walks among the people, like he who is in total darkness, and cannot get out of it?

—The Qur'an (6:122)

To Omeed

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Prologue

Defining a New Problem of Evil

Summary of the Chapter

Section 1. This section describes the story of the Prophet's uncle's conversion to Islam as well as that of Iblis's disobedience to God. In both stories the question of the conflict between morality and revelation arises.

Section 2. Some examples of morally controversial Scriptural passages are presented.

Section 3. A seemingly prescribed evil is an action prescribed by Scripture which is deemed immoral by our independent moral judgments. Some contemporary Islamic scholars deny the existence of any seemingly prescribed evil by using the reinterpretation strategy or the contextualization strategy. I will argue that neither of those strategies works.

Section 4. The new problem of evil, that is, the problem of divinely prescribed evil, is presented as a tension between three theses: the divinity of Scripture, the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, and the reliability of our independent moral judgments. The section ends with an explanation of the book's structure, which represents different approaches to solving the problem.

Section 5. This section explains the value of finding a historically informed solution to the problem of prescribed evil. The section also presents a preliminary historical background for readers unfamiliar with the Islamic tradition.

1. Two Stories

Let me begin with two stories about morality and revelation and their potential conflict.

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The First Story

The epigraph of the book is a verse from the Qur'an, reportedly revealed to describe the moral dissimilitude of two leaders of the Meccan community: Abū Jahl, one of the Prophet's most determined enemies, and Hamzah, the Prophet's uncle and a strong supporter.[1] The verse seems to refer to Hamzah's conversion to Islam. Hamzah was in disbelief, but God made him a light by which he could walk among the people. Abū Jahl, on the other hand, is in total darkness and cannot get out of it. Hamzah's conversion has a curious element, however.

While Hamzah was a powerful man in the community, he did not accept Islam for several years, even after he was personally approached by the Prophet to accept the Prophet's message. What helped him to see the truth was witnessing severe harassment of the Prophet (and early Muslims) by the majority, under the leadership of Abū Jahl. Disturbed by what he saw, he took the side of the weak and the vulnerable. In this famous story, it is first and foremost Hamzah's sense of justice, and not the content of revelation, that helped him to see the truth. What, then, is the light by which he came back from the dead and walked among people? Is it his sense of justice or the Prophet's message? It looks like the former. Hamzah's sense of justice paved the way for him to see the truth in the Prophet's message.

But now imagine this hypothetical scenario: years after his conversion to Islam, he comes across a verse that seems to be asking him to do something that goes against his sense of justice. Suppose that Scripture asks him to harass the weak and the vulnerable. What should he do then? While it looks intuitively very plausible that he should again take the side of the weak and the vulnerable, the answer to the question is not so straightforward. Believers have always thought that God works in mysterious ways. We have witnessed countless disasters: earthquakes, flooding, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, diseases, and so on. Despite great tragedies that we can't find meaning in, believers have kept their faith, holding that God works in ways that we cannot understand, and so cannot judge God's acts with our limited intellect. The same might be said in the hypothetical scenario: we cannot judge Scripture by our limited intellect.

[1] See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, editor-in-chief, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 38.

The Second Story

The Qur'an tells us the story of Iblis's disobedience: When God created Adam, He "said to the angels: 'Bow yourselves to Adam'; so they bowed themselves, save Iblis—he was not of those that bowed themselves" (7:11). Iblis's disobedience brought him eternal damnation. The Qur'an describes the reason for his disobedience as follows: "Said He, 'What prevented thee to bow thyself, when I commanded thee?' Said he, 'I am better than he; Thou createdst me of fire, and him Thou createdst of clay' " (7:12). According to the orthodox reading of the story, Iblis had too much pride to bow to Adam, and this pride is the cause of his ruin. However, there is an alternative reading of the story, suggested by the Persian Sufi al-Hallaj and his followers.[2] On their reading of the story, Iblis was the supreme monotheist, an unwavering lover of God who could not bring himself to worship anything but God. Interpreting bowing to Adam as an expression of worship, Iblis decides that his refusal to worship anyone but God is more valuable than avoiding any penalty or curse bestowed on him for his disobedience.

My goal is not to evaluate this alternative interpretation. But let's imagine for a moment that the alternative interpretation is correct. On this alternative reading, Iblis's independent moral principle of worshiping no one but God was in conflict with God's command, and he decided to take sides with his own moral principle. Should he have done so? What would you do if you were in Iblis's shoes? Imagine a case in which you are commanded by God to do something that goes against your conscience. What should you do in this hypothetical situation? On the one hand, you have to stick to your morals and principles. But on the other hand, who are you to judge what is moral and what is not, when God tells you what to do?[3]

[2] See Whitney S. Bodman, *The Poetics of Iblīs: Narrative Theology in the Qur'ān*. Vol. 62 (Harvard University Press, 2011), 262–67. Hud Hudson's paper "Iblis, Abraham, and Teleological Suspensions," *The Monist* 104.3 (2021): 281–99, drew my attention to this example. I was inspired by him to begin the book with this story. Al-Hallaj's position on Iblis is not, of course, orthodox. Nevertheless, it inspired later Sufis, some of whom adopted it. A notable example is Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani (interestingly al-Hallaj and Ayn al-Qudat are the two early Sufi martyrs—though they were not killed for their views on Iblis). See C. W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 77–80.

[3] I chose these two stories to introduce the problem of the book, but there are two other well-known Qur'anic stories about the clash between our moral principles and revelation, namely, the story of Moses and Khidr, and the story of Abraham's sacrifice. I will talk about those stories in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

2. Morally Controversial Scriptural Passages

The hypothetical scenarios discussed in the last section might not be purely hypothetical. Many believers from different faiths today are in a situation very much like the hypothetical scenarios I described. While believers take Scripture to be the word of God, they find Scriptural passages that seem incompatible with their modern moral sensibilities. The examples are abundant. Let me give a few examples from the Qur'an.[4]

- Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, as God has given some of them an advantage over others, and because they spend out of their wealth. The good women are obedient, guarding what God would have them guard. As for those from whom you fear disloyalty, admonish them, and abandon them in their beds, then strike them. But if they obey you, seek no way against them (4:34)
- God instructs you regarding your children: The male receives the equivalent of the share of two females. (4:11)
- And call to witness two men from among you. If two men are not available, then one man and two women whose testimony is acceptable to all—if one of them fails to remember, the other would remind her. (2:282)
- As for the thief, whether male or female, cut their hands as a penalty for what they have reaped. (5:38)
- The adulteress and the adulterer—whip each one of them a hundred lashes, and let no pity towards them overcome you regarding God's Law, if you believe in God and the Last Day. And let a group of believers witness their punishment. (24:2)
- And all married women [are forbidden unto you] except those [slaves] you rightfully possess. (4:24)

The passages cited from the Qur'an, taken literally, seem to suggest that a woman has a strong duty to be obedient to her husband, that men are allowed to punish their wives when they fear that their wives may not be obedient, that the norms governing inheritance should be discriminatory against women, that women's testimony is not as worthy as men's, that there should be severe corporal punishments for theft and adultery, that slavery is permissible, and that having a sexual relation with a slave is permitted. According

[4] The translations are from Talal Itani.

to modern moral sensibilities, these prescriptions violate various norms of justice and fairness.

It is not only the Qur'an which contains morally counterintuitive passages. We can find morally controversial passages in Scripture of other religions. For example, the following passages are from the Bible.[5]

- Wives, submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:22–25)
- If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death. (Leviticus 20:9)
- If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death. (Leviticus 20:10)
- If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death. (Leviticus 20:13)
- If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. (Deuteronomy 22:20–21)

The passages cited from the Bible, taken literally, have morally objectionable content. Let's call Scriptural passages whose apparent meaning seems morally questionable *morally controversial passages*. Morally controversial passages can and have been used in efforts to show that either God is immoral or Scripture is not divine.[6] In other words, morally controversial passages are taken as evidence against the following claim:

Divinity of Scripture. Scripture is the words of an omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God.

[5] The translations of the Bible are from New International Version.

[6] E.g., Louise Anthony, "Does God Love Us," in *Divine Evil*, edited by Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29–47; Edwin Curley, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," in Bergman, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil*, 58–79; Evan Fales, "Satanic Verses, Moral Chaos in Holy Writ," in Bergman, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil*, 91–109.

Many devout Jews, Christians, and Muslims accept the divinity of Scripture. I think it would be even harder for Muslims to deny the divinity of Scripture than it is for Jews and Christians. After all, it is widely accepted that the Bible consists of *reports* of various prophets' sayings and deeds. Orthodox Jews and Christians, of course, think that the authors of the Bible were divinely inspired. But it is at the core of Islamic belief that the Qur'an is God's direct revelation to the Prophet. The Qur'an is what God has said to the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, denying the divinity of Scripture is not a viable option for a Muslim believer.

The counterpart of the Bible in the Islamic world might be Hadith, that is, the collection of the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad.[7] Hadith is not the direct words of God. Accordingly, one might think that there is room for error in Hadith in a way that there is not in the Qur'an. However, the received view in the Islamic tradition is that Hadith has the same status as the Qur'an. Neither can be mistaken. Muslims believe that the Prophet is infallible, at least with regard to issues pertaining to religion, and so the sayings of the Prophet with regard to religious matters cannot be mistaken.[8]

The orthodox Islamic position on the authority of Hadith (when they are found to be historically authentic) is very similar to the orthodox position of Jews and Christians on the authority of the Bible. Christians and Jews believe that while the Bible might not be the direct words of God, the authors of the Bible were divinely inspired, and thus they believe that there is no room for mistake in the Bible. Similarly, Muslims predominately believe that while the sayings of the Prophet are not directly God's words, there can't be any mistake in them. So, as long as a Hadith is authentic, that is, it accurately presents the Prophet's words, its content must be true. Of course, there is always room to question the authenticity of a particular Hadith. That is, one may deny that this reported saying of the Prophet is *in fact* a saying of the Prophet. But when it is established that this saying is such, the majority of Muslims do not allow for any possible error in terms of the *content* of the saying. Accordingly,

[7] According to the Shia, Hadith also includes the sayings of imams.

[8] For example, in a textbook in Islamic seminaries, entitled *The Authority of the Tradition*, we read, "On the question of the authority of the Prophet, we did not find in the books of theologians such as al-Ghazali, al-Bazdawi, al-Amidi, and those who follow their paths, including the scholars of jurisprudence, any *explicit or implicit disagreement*. Those people are the people who have studied the books of their predecessors rigorously and have examined even the minor differences thoroughly. They don't even see the need to present reasons to justify the authority of the tradition. All they do is to briefly discuss the question of infallibility before addressing the authority of the tradition." ʿAbd al-Khāliq, ʿAbd al-Ghanī, *The Authority of the Tradition* (حجية السنة) (Dār al-wafāʾ, Egypt, 1993), 248.

a thesis similar to the divinity of Scripture can be formulated with regard to Hadith.

> *Infallibility of the Prophet*. Hadiths, if authentic, are the words of an infallible morally perfect Prophet.

The infallibility of the Prophet and the divinity of Scripture are very similar. If the Prophet, as traditionally conceived, is infallible and morally perfect, there would be no difference between God's words and the Prophet's words with respect to the possibility of error. The epistemic status of the Prophet's words would be the same as that of the Qur'an. In other words, on the traditional understanding of Hadith, Hadith is part of Scripture. Scripture is divided into two parts: one part is the direct words of God, while the other part is the words of the Prophet, who is divinely inspired. The second part, thus, is the indirect words of God and enjoys the same epistemic and moral status as the first part.

There are many well-established Hadiths which seem incompatible with modern moral sensibilities. Just to give a few examples, there are many well-established Hadiths prescribing the execution of apostates and the stoning of the adulterers, adulteresses, and homosexuals.

- Allah's Messenger said, "The blood of a Muslim who confesses that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that I am His Apostle, cannot be shed except in three cases: In Qisas [i.e., retaliation] for murder, a married person who commits illegal sexual intercourse and the one who reverts from Islam (apostate) and leaves the Muslims." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 9, book 83, Hadith 17). (Similar Hadiths can be found in *Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:52:260, 9:84:57, 9:89:271, 9:84:58, 9:84:64.)[9]
- A man from Bani Aslam came to Allah's Messenger while he was in the mosque and called [the Prophet] saying, "O Allah's Messenger! I have committed illegal sexual intercourse." On that the Prophet turned his face from him to the other side, whereupon the man moved to the side towards which the Prophet had turned his face, and said, "O Allah's Messenger! I have committed illegal sexual intercourse." The Prophet turned his face (from him) to the other side whereupon the man moved to the side towards which the Prophet had turned his face, and repeated

[9] The translations are from Dr. M. Muhsin Khan.

his statement. The Prophet turned his face (from him) to the other side again. The man moved again (and repeated his statement) for the fourth time. So when the man had given witness four times against himself, the Prophet called him and said, "Are you insane?" He replied, "No." The Prophet then said (to his companions), "Go and stone him to death." The man was a married one. Jabir bin `Abdullah Al-Ansari said: I was one of those who stoned him. We stoned him at the Musalla in Medina. When the stones hit him with their sharp edges, he fled, but we caught him at Al-Harra and stoned him till he died. (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 7:63: 196) (Similar Hadiths can be found in *Sahih al-Bukhari* 2:23:413, 3:34–421, 3:49:860, 3:50:885, 4:56:829, 6:60:79, 7:63:195.)

- If a man who is not married is seized committing sodomy, he will be stoned to death. (*Sunan Abi Dawud*, book 39, Hadith 4448)

According to our modern moral sensibilities, these Hadiths are morally counterintuitive. Of course, with respect to any reported Hadith, including the ones I mentioned, there is always room to deny their authenticity. That is, one might say that they do not report accurately what the Prophet has *in fact* said. However, some morally controversial Hadiths like the ones mentioned here are very well established. They are mentioned in all major books of Hadith and have been accepted by the Muslim community for centuries. It is hard to deny their authenticity based on historical records.

If Islamic Scripture includes Hadith, as the Islamic community predominantly holds, the number of morally controversial passages increases tremendously. However, to address the main problem of the book, I don't need even to assume the orthodox view that Islamic Scripture includes Hadith. The problem arises as long as we accept that there are some morally controversial passages in Scripture, be it the Qur'an, the Bible, or Hadith.

3. Seeming Prescribed Evil

The existence of morally controversial passages may generate a problem for the divinity of Scripture. What makes morally controversial passages problematic for the divinity of Scripture is that they seem to prescribe actions that a perfect God would not prescribe. These passages, taken in their apparent meaning, prescribe actions which are immoral according to our modern independent moral judgments. By *our independent moral judgments*, I mean

moral judgments obtained through careful a priori moral reflections and sufficient empirical observations, independent of Scripture. The following are some examples of the independent moral judgments that we make in modern times:

> A woman does not have a strong duty to be obedient to her husband.
> Men are not allowed to beat their wives.
> The norms governing inheritance should not discriminate against women.
> Discrimination against women and sexual minorities is always wrong.
> Women's testimony is as trustworthy as men's.
> There should never be corporal punishments for theft and adultery.
> Slavery is never permissible.
> Apostates should never be killed because of their unbelief.

Surely we might say if God is perfectly just, He should not prescribe or permit immoral actions. God's perfect nature is in tension with what we may call *seemingly prescribed evil by Scripture*. Let's define "seemingly prescribed evil" as follows:

> *Seemingly Prescribed Evil* describes *by definition* an action prescribed or permitted by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage which seems immoral, according to our independent moral judgments.

Note that the definition of seemingly prescribed evil is broad enough to include not only seemingly immoral acts prescribed by the best interpretation of Scriptural passage, but also seemingly immoral acts that are deemed *permissible* by Scripture. The morally controversial passages cited in the last section, when taken in their apparent meaning, seem to prescribe or permit actions which are immoral according to our independent moral judgments.

The existence of *some* seemingly prescribed evil is sufficient to generate the new problem of evil which I am concerned with in the book. While the classical problem of evil involves the conflict between a perfect God and immoral events in the world, the new problem of evil arises from a conflict between the divinity of Scripture and seemingly prescribed evil. That is, if God is just and the Scripture is God's words, He should not prescribe or permit evil actions. If so, seemingly prescribed evil is evidence against either God or the divinity of Scripture (I will explain the problem more carefully in the next

section). As Plantinga explains in the following, the theist could respond to this problem in two different ways:

> There are fundamentally two ways to respond to this difficulty. First, take the passages at face value: God did issue these commands, and had good reason to do so. And second, take it that God did not in fact issue those commands. The first is perhaps the majority Christian response.[10]

There are problems with both of Plantinga's ways of dealing with the problem. His first way to resist the problem is to insist that seemingly prescribed evil is in fact consistent with the divinity of Scripture. I will come back to this possibility in the next section. The second way to respond to the problem is to deny the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, that is, to say that *no* Scriptural passage, when interpreted correctly, prescribes actions that are immoral according to our independent moral judgments. The theist might hold that the best interpretation of morally controversial passages is not their apparent meaning, since the interpretation of an ancient text, the context of which is radically different from our own, is difficult. Eleonore Stump explains the difficulty as follows:

> Even a carefully supported interpretation of narratives is, in effect, only a recommendation to look at a text in a certain way. It invites readers to consider that text and ask themselves whether after all they do not see the text in the way the interpretation recommends. Interpretations present, suggest, offer, and invite; unlike philosophical arguments, they cannot attempt to compel. . . .These remarks apply to narrative texts in our own culture and language, but they are especially pertinent when the narratives in question are written in a language very different from our own and stem from a culture very different from our own.[11]

There is a long debate as to whether there are sufficient textual reasons to deny the literal interpretation of morally controversial passages. The opponents of the divinity of Scripture hold that some of those passages are very clear and unambiguous, and that there are no adequate textual reasons to depart from

[10] Alvin Plantinga, "Comments on 'Satanic Verses, Moral Chaos in Holy Writ,'" in Bergman, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil*, 111.

[11] Eleonore Stump, "Comments on 'Does God Love Us,'" in Bergman, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil*, 49–50.

the literal meaning of the text. This response is even more plausible in the case of passages with moral injunctions, as those passages have very clear and specific content. This is evidenced by the fact that the dominant contemporary views in Islamic jurisprudence (including the Sunni schools of law and the Imāmiyya—Shia—school) regarding many of the morally controversial passages are in line with the literal reading of the passages. In other words, throughout centuries, those passages are understood by scholars with their literal meaning. Just to give an example, the dominant view regarding the penalty for adultery is that it should be severe (it is either one hundred stripes or stoning, depending on the case). The difference among the various schools of law concerns what constitutes adultery, what are the epistemic criteria to establish its occurrence, who has the authority to execute the penalty, and perhaps whether stoning is textually justified. But there is virtually *no* disagreement among different schools of Islamic jurisprudence about the core belief that adultery should be severely and corporally punished. The same holds for the penalties for theft and homosexuality, and for differential treatment of men and women in various subjects.

In modern times, however, some Islamic scholars (who could be categorized as *modern Islamic reformers*) have attempted to *deny* the existence of seemingly prescribed evil. They deny that there is *any* action prescribed or permitted by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage which seems immoral, according to our independent moral judgments. In what follows, I will discuss two general strategies, that is, reinterpretation and contextualization, used to deny the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, and explain why these strategies do not look promising.[12]

Reinterpretation

According to the reinterpretation view, exegetical considerations and *linguistic reasoning* can help us see that the correct interpretation of morally controversial passages is in fact *consistent* with our independent moral judgments. Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas are two modern Islamic scholars whose project is to show that the Qur'anic passages, when understood correctly, are consistent with our independent moral judgments with regard

[12] I am indebted to Fatema Amijee for the presentation of these two views in her excellent paper "How to Be a Feminist Muslim," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 9.2 (2023): 193–213, https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2022.9.

to the relation between men and women. To this aim, they sometimes use linguistic reasoning and sometimes employ the contextualization method. I will use some of their discussions to demonstrate how linguistic reinterpretation is supposed to work.

The Qur'an (4:34) seems to imply that men are in charge of the affairs of women, that wives have a strong duty to be obedient to their husbands, and that husbands can punish wives by beating them when they think that their wives are rebellious. Wadud argues that this prescription is mainly limited to family affairs and is consistent with our independent moral judgments:

> For obvious biological reasons, a primary responsibility for the woman is child-bearing . . . [W]hile this responsibility is so obvious and important, what is the responsibility of the male in this family and society at large? The Qur'an establishes his responsibility as *qiwamah* [i.e., in charge of / managers]: seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities which jeopardize that primary demanding responsibility that only she can fulfill. Ideally, everything she needs to fulfill her primary responsibility comfortably should be supplied in society, by the male: this means physical protection as well as material sustenance. Otherwise, it would be a serious oppression against the woman.[13]

With regard to the issue of women's duty of obedience and men's permission to beat their wives who, they fear, are rebellious, she says:

> The word *qanitat* used here to describe "good" women, is too often falsely translated to mean "obedient," and then assumed to mean "obedient to the husband." In the context of the whole Qur'an, this word is used with regard to both males (2:238, 3:17, 33:35) and females (4:34, 33:34, 66:5, 66:12). It describes a characteristic or personality trait of believers towards Allah. They are inclined towards being co-operative with one another and subservient before Allah. . . . As for those (feminine plural) from whom you fear *nushuz* . . . , it should first be noted that the word *nushuz* likewise is used with both males (4:128) and females (4:34), although it has been defined differently for each. When applied to the wife, the term is usually defined as "disobedience to the husband." Others have said this verse indicates that

[13] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 72.

> the wife must obey the husband. . . . However, since the Qur'an uses *nushuz* for both the male and the female, it cannot mean "disobedience to the husband." Sayyid Qutb explains it as a state of disorder between the married couple. In case of disorder, what suggestions does the Qur'an give as possible solutions? There is 1. A verbal solution. . . . If open discussion fails, then a more drastic solution: 2. Separation is indicated. Only in extreme cases a final measure: 3. The "scourge" is permitted.[14]

As we can see, Wadud seeks linguistic reasons to weaken the counterintuitive implication of the Qur'anic passage. One immediate worry that I shall come back to is that Wadud's exegesis is in contrast with the traditional understanding of the passage assumed throughout centuries. Another important problem is that although Wadud claims that the weakened implications are consistent with our independent moral judgments, they are clearly not. For example, regarding whether or not men should be in charge, Wadud assumes that it is appropriate to assign the role of child-raising to women, and that the Qur'anic passage determines the role of males to be materially supporting women to fulfill their primary responsibility. However, many feminists argue that justice in family and society requires a weakening of traditional ideas about gender. Various studies have shown that the traditional assignment of role in the family leads to an unjust division of domestic labor, unjust division of labor in society, the lack of access of women to high-paid jobs, an increase in domestic violence, and insecurity for women.[15]

The issue of men's permission to beat their wives also remains unsolved in Wadud's exegetical remarks. She says that "only in extreme cases . . . the 'scourge' is permitted." While it is not clear what Wadud's linguistic justification is to limit the application of the passage to "only extreme cases," a permission to beat women even in extreme cases goes against our moral judgments. To make the passage more in line with our moral judgments, Barlas, following some commentators, suggests that *daraba* (i.e., to strike) can be translated as "holding in confinement" in certain legal contexts.[16] But the permission to hold one's wife in confinement, when one fears that there is "a state of disorder," is still morally counterintuitive. With regard to this

[14] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 74–75.

[15] See Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). See also Claudia Geist, "The Welfare State and the Home: Regime Differences in the Domestic Division of Labour," *European Sociological Review* 21.1 (2005): 23–41.

[16] Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 189.

passage, then, the exegetical effort to depart from the literal meaning and to make the passage morally palatable might not be entirely successful, and so we might still think the passage provides us good reasons to believe that there is some seemingly prescribed evil.

Regarding testimonial injustice, Barlas says that the Qur'an 2:282 does not give us a permission to discount the value of women's testimony across the board:

> There are a total of five cases of evidence giving in the Qur'an, and in only one does it make the provision about two women, for very specific social reasons. Had this been an across-the-board formula in the Qur'an, it would not have attached greater weight to a wife's evidence than to the husband's in the far more consequential matter of adultery.[17]

On the question of discrimination against women in inheritance, Wadud writes:

> Qur'anic statement, in verses 4:11–12, makes "the share of the male . . . equivalent to the portion of two female (siblings)," [yet] a complete look at this same verse enumerates a variety of proportional divisions between males and females. In fact, if there is one female child, her share is half the inheritance. In addition, the consideration of parents, siblings, distant relatives, as well as offspring is discussed in a variety of different combinations to indicate that the proportion for the female of one-half the proportion for the male is not the sole mode of property division, but one of several proportional arrangements possible.[18]

I worry that those exegetical remarks are often not sufficient to make morally controversial passages consistent with our independent moral judgments. Concerning testimonial injustice, even if Barlas is right that there is no across-the-board formula in the Qur'an to discount the value of women's testimony, the mere fact that in some cases, such as in the case of financial matters as suggested in 2:282, women's testimony is not considered to be as worthy as men's makes it the case that the Scriptural passage seems to permit an unjust act (according to our independent moral judgments) and is sufficient for us

[17] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 190.
[18] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 87.

to believe in the existence of seemingly prescribed evil. Regarding the question of inheritance, the problem is that, even if Wadud is right that the Qur'an approves of a variety of different modes of property division, the fact that the passage also holds that the sexist mode of property division is "one of several *proportional* arrangements possible" creates a tension between the passage and our independent moral judgments.

Wadud and Barlas do not discuss corporal punishment for theft and adultery. However, the general strategy of Islamic scholars to reconcile the Qur'anic passages with our independent moral reasoning is to minimize the cases in which corporal punishment is allowed. For example, regarding 5:38, Ramon Harvey writes:

> Jurists have discussed the conditions required for a person to be considered a sāriq (thief) in the legal sense. They generally act to circumscribe the concept to the minimum number of possible offenders by requiring the stolen item to have been guarded and specifying a minimum value for it, treating these as ambiguous (mujmal) aspects requiring further explanation (bayān). Abū Zahra provides an alternative to the classical view by arguing that the fact that the verse mentions "the thief" is an indication that the punishment is only to be applied to the repeat offender who truly deserves this epithet.[19]

The same strategy is also employed in the case of adultery. Modern scholars usually seek to minimize the cases in which corporal punishment is appropriate by, among other things, raising the bar for establishing that adultery has happened. Yet the problem is that a permission for the use of corporal punishment for theft and adultery even in exceptional cases goes against our independent moral judgments.

While the recent attempts to reinterpret Scripture to make it in line with our independent moral judgments are not entirely successful, there are *three general reasons* to think that the reinterpretation view *in principle* cannot work, or at least is inadequate.

First, our moral judgments evolve over time. Our moral consciousness has broadened through the years. We make moral progress, refining our moral judgments and discovering instances of injustice to which we were blind before. If we look at human history, many moral judgments that seem

[19] Ramon Harvey, *Qur'an and the Just Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 184.

obviously true today were not considered so a hundred years ago. It might be the case that at some point in history, maybe at the time of revelation, our moral judgments *did* accord with our understanding of Scripture. Our moral judgments, however, have changed enormously in the last thousand years, and so it is inevitable that *some* of our moral judgments today will differ from the judgments assumed in Scripture. The discrepancy between our moral judgments today and canonical historical texts is not even peculiar to religious Scripture. Commenting on the US Constitution, especially the so-called "three-fifths compromise," Noam Chomsky says:

> There is a definite broadening of our moral consciousness over the ages. Things that were considered entirely legitimate two hundred years ago are considered Nazi-like today. For example, if some Third World country were to produce something like the US Constitution, which was a revolutionary and highly libertarian document at the time, we would call it a reversion of Nazism.[20]

While our moral judgments change, the text does not. There are various linguistic, syntactic, and semantic constraints that limit our interpretation of an existing text. We are not at liberty to interpret a text in any way we like. Given the stark discrepancy between Scripture and our moral judgments today, it requires a *radical* reinterpretation of Scripture to make it consistent with our moral judgments. It would be too optimistic to think that we could engage in a radical reinterpretation of the text without straying from a faithful reading of the text. I have provided a couple of examples of morally controversial passages, and reviewed some recent attempts to reinterpret those passages. We noted that those attempts could not remove *all* moral objections to the passages. Modern scholars have too many linguistic constraints to be able to reinterpret the passages in a way that it resists all contemporary moral objections to them. They can mitigate the moral objections, but they can't remove them altogether.

Second, as our moral judgments evolve over time, the problem of divinely prescribed evil is bound to arise, if not today, tomorrow. If one holds that exegetical reinterpretation can show that there is *no* seemingly prescribed evil today *or ever*, one holds that at *any given time* in human history one can

[20] "Moral Consciousness | Noam Chomsky," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJucBx7ZF5M, accessed August 3, 2023.

reinterpret Scripture to make it consistent with moral judgments *of that time*. But if we think that we have always the power to reinterpret Scripture in a way that makes it consistent with our moral judgments at any given time, we should think that Scripture has no determinate meaning; the meaning of the text is *underdetermined*. But this makes Scripture morally and religiously unimportant. Moreover, it is just not true that Scripture has no meaning of its own and is so malleable that could take any form we want.

Third, bringing Scripture in line with our contemporary moral judgments requires a *radical departure* from the apparent meaning of the text and from the way that the text has been understood throughout centuries.[21] There are two different reasons *not* to take morally controversial passages at face value:

Textual Justification. There are textual reasons (e.g., ambiguity, contextual elements) to interpret morally controversial passages nonliterally.

Moral Justification. There are moral reasons to interpret morally controversial passages nonliterally, as the literal understanding of the passages is inconsistent with a morally perfect God.

[21] To give just one example of the traditional understanding of the Qur'an, the following is Ibn Kathir's exegesis of Qur'an 4:34. *Tafsir* (i.e., Qur'anic exegesis) by Ibn Kathir is considered among the best commentaries on the Qur'an by the Muslim community (translated into English by a group of scholars under the supervision of Sheikh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri). As we can see, Ibn Kathir's understanding is very close to the apparent meaning of the passage. The same goes for other controversial passages. "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women," meaning, the man is responsible for the woman, and he is her maintainer, caretaker, and leader who disciplines her if she deviates; "because Allah has made one of them to excel the other," meaning, because men excel over women and are better than they for certain tasks. This is why prophethood, as well as other important positions of leadership, was exclusive to men. The Prophet said, "People who appoint a woman to be their leader, will never achieve success." "As to those women on whose part you see ill conduct," meaning, the woman from whom you see ill conduct with her husband, such as when she acts as if she is above her husband, disobeys him, ignores him, dislikes him, and so forth. When these signs appear in a woman, her husband should advise her and remind her of Allah's torment if she disobeys him. Indeed, Allah ordered the wife to obey her husband and prohibited her from disobeying him, because of the enormity of his rights and all that he does for her. Al-Bukhari recorded that Abu Hurayrah said that the Messenger of Allah said, "If the man asks his wife to come to his bed and she declines, the angels will keep cursing her until the morning." "As to those women on whose part you see ill conduct, admonish them (first)." With regard to Allah's statement, "Abandon them in their beds," `Ali bin Abi Talhah reported that Ibn `Abbas said, "The abandonment refers to not having intercourse with her, to lie on her bed with his back to her." Several others said similarly that Allah's statement, "Beat them" means, if advice and ignoring her in bed do not produce the desired results, you are allowed to discipline the wife, without severe beating. Muslim recorded that Jabir said that during the Farewell Hajj, the Prophet said: "Fear Allah regarding women, for they are your assistants. You have the right on them that they do not allow any person whom you dislike to step on your mat. However, if they do that, you are allowed to discipline them lightly. They have a right on you that you provide them with their provision and clothes, in a reasonable manner." Ibn `Abbas and several others said that the Ayah refers to a beating that is not violent. Al-Hasan Al-Basri said that it means a beating that is not severe.

The radical departure from the traditional understanding of the text cannot be authorized by textual reasons alone. The traditional scholars of Scripture were not ignorant about what the text apparently means and what the linguistic rules are. The reinterpretation view, if successful at all, can suggest a new *possibility* for understanding the text. But to vindicate this possible reading as the *correct* reading of the text we need to appeal to Moral Justification. But, then, one might ask why we should take our contemporary moral judgments for granted. Why can't Scripture guide us about what is morally correct? The reinterpretation view often takes our contemporary moral judgments for granted without providing an argument to justify this assumption.[22] I will argue in the first part of the book that there are powerful arguments to the effect that Scripture should inform the correct understanding of morality, and not the other way around. Therefore, the reinterpretation strategy cannot succeed unless it provides a principled argument to explain why Moral Justification is correct.

Contextualization

According to the contextualization view, to understand a Scriptural passage, especially a morally controversial one, we have to consider the historical context of the passage, which includes the values and practices of the people to whom Scripture is revealed. The contextualization view holds that when we take into account the context of Scripture, we can see that the following claims are true:

(C1) The conduct prescribed by the Qur'an is in general an improvement in the practices that were culturally dominant at the time.

[22] In "How to Be a Feminist Muslim," Amijee rejects the reinterpretation view on the grounds that it is theologically undesirable for our understanding of Scripture to be influenced by our independent moral thinking. I agree that one can't just *assume* that our independent moral judgments are correct, and we will see in Part I of the book that many Islamic thinkers hold that our moral judgments need to follow Scripture. However, if my arguments in Part II of the book can establish that our independent moral judgments are reliable, I don't find the attempt to make God's words compatible with our independent moral judgments in principle *theologically* undesirable (I will come back to this issue in the last chapter of the book). As I explained, the problem with such an attempt is that (1) it is doubtful that it can succeed, (2) given the constant change in our moral judgments, it might deprive Scripture from having any content, and (3) it presupposes the validity of our independent moral thinking without providing any justification for it.

> (C2) Given the vast difference between our culture and that of Scripture, the conduct prescribed in morally controversial passages applies only to people within the culture of Scripture.

Barlas explains (C1) in the following way:

> We can only address these types of issues if . . . we . . . keep in mind the historical context of its revelation in a seventh-century (Arab) tribal patriarchy (much like the Taliban in Afghanistan today). Contextualizing the Qur'an's teachings (i.e., explaining them with reference to the immediate audience and social conditions to which they were addressed), shows that, far from being oppressive, they were profoundly egalitarian.[23]

Barlas also approvingly quotes Wadud to state the second claim:

> The mere fact that the Qur'an was revealed in seventh-century Arabia when the Arabs held certain perceptions and misconceptions about women and were involved in certain specific lewd practices against them resulted in some injunctions specific to that culture.[24]

We might apply this strategy to all controversial passages cited in section 2. For example, we can apply it to the wife-beating passage (4:34). Wadud says that "in the light of the excessive violence towards women indicated in the biographies of the Companions and by practices condemned in the Qur'an (like female infanticide), this verse should be taken as prohibiting unchecked violence against females. Thus, this is not permission, but a severe restriction of existing practices."[25] The main idea is that the Qur'anic passage functions to restrict (and thus makes an improvement in) the existing practice of unchecked violence against women. Barlas makes a similar claim:

> We also can deduce that the Qur'an uses *daraba* [i.e., to strike] in a restrictive rather than in a prescriptive sense by examining the historical context of this teaching. At a time when men did not need permission to abuse

[23] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 6.
[24] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 9.
[25] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 74–75.

> women, this Ayah [i.e., verse] simply could not have functioned as a license; in such a context, it could only have been a restriction insofar as the Qur'an made *daraba* the measure of last, not the first, or even the second, resort. And if the Qur'an meant to restrict abuse even during those most abusive of times, there is no reason to regard this Ayah as an authorization at a time when we claim to have become more, not less, civilized.[26]

Barlas, then, claims that the Qur'anic passage does not give permission to men in our time to beat their wives. The permission described in the verse is only limited to a specific time and culture. I am sympathetic with both of the claims made by the contextualization view. But the question is whether the contextualization view can show that there is no seemingly prescribed evil, and the answer is no. It is important to know that (C1) and (C2) do not entail that there is no seemingly prescribed evil. While it might be the case that permission to beat one's wife only as a last resort was substantial progress on the practice of abusing women by men, this does not imply that the act of beating one's wife was justified back then. To show that there is no prescribed evil, the contextualization view needs to show that the action prescribed by Scripture is *justified*, not that it is better than some very worse alternatives.

It is true that an action might be justified in one circumstance, but not in another. There can be cases where the contextualization of an action shows that the action was *justified in the context of its occurrence*. For example, it may be okay to kill a person in self-defense, but it is not okay to kill a person to protect one's shoes. The contextualization view sometimes seems to claim that actions which can be described as seemingly prescribed evil *were not evil in the context in which Scripture is revealed.* For example, regarding the case of testimonial injustice, Wadud says:

> Considering that women could be coerced in that society, if one witness was female, she would be easy prey for some male who wanted to force her to disclaim her testimony. When there are two women, they can support each other—especially in view of the term chosen: if she (*tudilla*) "goes astray," the other can (*tudhakkira*) "remind" her, or "recall her attention" to the terms of agreement.[27]

[26] Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 188.
[27] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 86.

The claim here is that in a society in which women could be coerced to testify, the requirement of having two females to witness is not unjust. While this justification has some merit, one might think that this justification is not sufficient to remove the charge of imposing epistemic injustice to women by this requirement. After all, enforcing this rule makes it the case that a sole woman has less chance of being heard in society.

The claim that, according to our independent moral judgments, *all* instances of seemingly prescribed evil were justified in the context of Scripture is independent of (C1) and (C2) and does not follow from them. While it might be true that our independent moral judgments deem *some* instances of seemingly prescribed evil as justified in the context of Scripture, it is unlikely that the contextualization view can show that *all* instances of seemingly prescribed evil should be deemed justified in the context of Scripture by our independent moral judgments. For example, we hold that one may not beat one's wife even in a society in which violence against women is dominant. One should not beat one's wife, *period*. It is morally wrong to beat one's wife at any time or in any culture. Similarly, we might think that treating women unfairly (regarding inheritance or testimony) is *always* wrong, that severe corporal punishment for theft or adultery is *always* wrong, and that holding slaves has *always* been wrong, and so on. If we hold to these moral judgments, it is unlikely that we can deem all instances of seemingly prescribed evil to be morally justified in the context of their prescription.

Similar to the reinterpretation view, the contextualization view, through endorsing (C2), seek to make morally controversial passages morally more palatable by weakening their implications. It blocks the generalization of the moral rule prescribed by the passage by indexing it to a particular time and culture. In the last chapter of the book, I will explain that there is a grain of truth in the contextualization view. However, as a strategy to deny the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, the contextualization view cannot work as long as we hold to moral judgments such as the prohibition of beating one's wife in all times and cultures. On this view, the best interpretation of morally controversial passages in Scripture will still be regarded as prescribing or permitting actions which seem immoral to our contemporary moral judgments. It would just show that the prescription or permission was restricted to a certain audience.

There is also another important worry for the contextualization view. In fact, the third worry for the reinterpretation view applies to the

contextualization view. The traditional view regarding morally controversial passages is not to restrict them to a specific time and culture. According to the traditional view, all Scriptural injunctions are universal injunctions valid for all times and cultures. As we have seen, textual reasons by itself does not justify a rejection of the traditional view, and the motivation behind the contextualization view is Moral Justification. The contextualization view assumes that we have moral reasons to remove the tension between morally controversial passages and our independent moral judgments. However, we might ask, again, why our contemporary moral judgments should guide our interpretation of Scripture and its implications, and not the other way around. Why should we take Moral Justification for granted? Similar to the reinterpretation view, the contextualization view needs to defend Moral Justification.

In sum, for the reinterpretation view and the contextualization view to be preferable to the traditional view, we need to show that Moral Justification is correct, but as we will see in Part I of the book, this is not an easy job. Moreover, it looks like the reinterpretation view and the contextualization view fail to show that there is no seemingly prescribed evil. The problem of divinely prescribed evil arises if there is at least *one* instance of seemingly prescribed evil. There are many morally controversial passages in the Qur'an and the Bible. There are a great number of morally controversial passages in Hadith. I don't need to claim that the reinterpretation view or the contextualization view works for no controversial passage; as long as there is at least *one* passage in Scripture whose best interpretation goes against our moral judgment, we face the problem of divinely prescribed evil. Finally, based on the limited degree of freedom in interpretation and the substantial change in our moral judgments over a thousand years, I have presented a general argument to the effect that it is very unlikely that all seemingly prescribed evil can be explained away.

I will assume henceforth that there are some seemingly prescribed evils; that is, there are some actions permitted or prescribed by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage which our independent moral judgments deem immoral. For the sake of simplicity, I will use wife-beating (as it seems to be prescribed by the Qur'an 4:34) as my central example of a seemingly prescribed evil.[28] If it turns out that there are sufficient textual reasons for

[28] This example has the advantage of having a biblical counterpart. Ephesians (5:22–25) says wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

a successful exegetical reinterpretation of this particular verse, all my arguments can apply to other examples of seemingly prescribed evil for which we don't have appropriate exegesis.

4. The New Problem of Evil and the Structure of the Book

The new problem of evil that I address in the book consists of the fact that there is a tension between the following three theses:

Divinity of Scripture. Scripture is the words of an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God.

Existence of Seemingly Prescribed Evil. There are some actions prescribed or permitted by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage which seem immoral, according to our independent moral judgments.

Reliability of Our Independent Moral Judgments. Our independent moral judgments reliably represent moral values, moral duties, and moral permissions.

We can call this problem *the problem of Scriptural evil*, or *the problem of divinely prescribed evil* (or for short, *the problem of prescribed evil*).

While believers want to maintain *the divinity of Scripture*, they should find the other two theses very plausible too. I have argued for *the existence of seemingly prescribed evil* in the last section. Regarding *the reliability of our independent moral judgments*, think about our independent moral judgments that I mentioned in the last section: our judgments about the wrongness of violence against women, the wrongness of sexism and slavery, the wrongness of corporal punishment, the wrongness of discrimination against religious and sexual minorities, and so on. These judgments look true to us. We live by these moral judgments, and we are very confident that they are true. However, there is a tension between those three theses.

Although the divinity of Scripture is consistent with the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, their conjunction is in tension with the reliability of our independent moral judgments. To see the tension, suppose a believer takes the divinity of Scripture to be true. Let's also suppose that the person believes that there is some seemingly prescribed evil. Given belief in the divinity of Scripture, the person should believe that God wouldn't permit or prescribe conducts that are in fact immoral, and thus that seemingly prescribed evil

is not really evil. It merely looks evil. If our independent moral judgments deem an action prescribed by Scripture to be evil, it is because our independent moral judgments are not correct. On the other hand, if a believer accepts the reliability of our independent moral judgments, and the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, then that person should believe that some seemingly prescribed evil is really evil, and thus that Scripture prescribes evil. This would undermine belief in the divinity of Scripture.

We can in fact compare the problem of divinely prescribed evil to the classical problem of evil. The existence of seemingly prescribed evil is similar to the existence of seemingly pointless evil. The theist responds to the classical problem of evil by maintaining that God works in mysterious ways. For theists, natural evil is not evidence for God's inexistence because God has sufficient reasons to allow evil to occur in the world. We cannot judge God's acts with our limited intellect. The believer might want to say the same for the problem of prescribed evil. We may not, the believer would say, judge Scripture by our limited intellect. A seemingly prescribed evil such as beating one's wife or discrimination against women *looks* morally objectionable, given our limited knowledge of the moral realm. Yet we are never in a position to *justifiably believe* whether these actions are in fact wrong, *everything considered*. We can't justifiably believe that seemingly prescribed evil is in fact evil because the reliability of our independent moral judgments cannot be taken for granted. In fact, many contemporary Islamic, Christian, and Jew conservatives actually hold this position and behave accordingly. They believe that Scripture can reveal to us a morality hidden from our reason, a morality possibly quite different from our modern moral judgments.

The new problem of evil, that is, the problem of divinely prescribed evil, is more difficult for a theist to overcome than the classical problem of evil at least in three ways. First, the classical problem of evil can be resolved by denying that pointless evil exists. The theist can deny the existence of *pointless* evil by saying that we cannot know about God's reasons, and that He may in fact have sufficient reasons to allow evil to occur in the world. As I will explain in Chapter 2, holding a skeptical view about our knowledge of God's reasoning does not lead to skepticism about our everyday morality. However, if theists want to solve the problem of divinely prescribed evil *in just the same way*, they should deny the reliability of our independent moral judgments, which entails skepticism about modern moral beliefs (including beliefs about the wrongness of slavery, discrimination against women and sexual minorities, corporal punishment, etc.); it is a price that theists don't have to pay if they only care

about solving the classical problem of evil. Second, the problem of prescribed evil creates a difficulty for the theist's solution to the classical problem of evil. The theist's solution to this problem on its own might not have any implication for everyday morality, but when combined with Scripture's divinity and the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, it would. For, as I will explain in Part I, the theist's solution to the classical problem of evil seems to entail that Moral Justification (defined in the previous section) is false. But, as we will see, if Moral Justification is false, then it will be very hard for the theist to defend our modern moral beliefs. Third, while there is a large literature on the classical problem of evil, the problem of prescribed evil is underexplored. Even philosophers who have addressed the problem have taken the reliability of our independent moral judgments for granted.[29] While conservative theists frequently invoke hidden moral facts to question some of our modern moral intuitions, this skeptical argument has received little philosophical study.

The problem of prescribed evil can be approached in two ways. There are also two parts in this book, "Scripture First" and "Ethics First," each dealing with the problem in one of these two ways (see table 1 for a very brief description of the structure of the book). The first part of the book deals with the position of Islamic scholars who hold that when forming moral judgments, Scripture takes priority over our moral reason. Scripture comes first. Scripture, taken at face value, has the power of defeating our independent moral judgments. Let's call this *the Scripture-first view.* According to the Scripture-first view, we can solve the problem of prescribed evil by denying the reliability of our independent moral judgments. Part I shows that the Scripture-first view is the *dominant view* in the history of Islamic philosophy, which has been held and argued for from the early days of Islam until today.

Part I consists of three chapters. In each chapter, I explore arguments for rejecting the reliability of our independent moral judgments when they are in conflict with Scriptural injunctions. These arguments are offered by three major schools of Islamic philosophy that is, the Ash'arites (Chapter 1), the Mu'tazilites (Chapter 2), and the Greek-influenced philosophers, *falāsifa* (Chapter 3). Each chapter also explains the normative moral theory endorsed by each Islamic school as well as the moral epistemology implied by that theory. I will argue that each of school's moral theories corresponds roughly to one of the three major theories in contemporary moral philosophy, that

[29] See, for instance, Alvin Plantinga, "Comments on 'Satanic Verses.'" The same assumption is present in other essays of this anthology.

Table 1 The structure of the book

	Prologue	Defines the problem of prescribed evil as a tension between three theses: *the divinity of Scripture*, *the existence of seemingly prescribed evil*, and *the reliability of our independent moral judgments*. The prologue also explains why there are some seemingly prescribed evils despite some recent attempts to deny them.
Part I: Scripture First	Chapter 1	Explains how one can deny the reliability of our independent moral judgments by appealing to consequentialism. The argument against the reliability of our independent moral judgments is called *the argument for strict adherence*.
	Chapter 2	Explains how one might reconstruct the argument for strict adherence without appealing to consequentialism. This presents a final case for denying the reliability of our independent moral judgments.
	Chapter 3	Explains how Islamic philosophers reject the reliability of our independent moral judgments through their intellectualized epistemology and theological virtue ethics.
Part II: Ethics First	Chapter 4	Explains how one might withhold judgment regarding the reliability of our independent moral judgments while simultaneously maintaining that our independent moral judgments are *rationally* binding. This presents an ethics-first solution to the problem of prescribed evil.
	Chapter 5	Explores various ways to defend the reliability of our independent moral judgments against hidden moral facts.
	Chapter 6	Explains how we can make the three main theses consistent through adopting a legal interpretation of Scriptural injunctions. The chapter also gives an account of the moral function of Scripture.

is, consequentialism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics. Chapter 1, then, explains how one can deny the reliability of our independent moral judgments by appealing to consequentialism. I will call the argument for rejecting the reliability of our moral judgments in favor of accepting Scriptural injunctions at face value *the argument for strict adherence*. I will argue that this argument, as formulated in accordance with the ideas of the Ashʿarite theologian al-Ghazālī, has certain problems.

On the basis of the moral theory of the Muʿtazilites, Chapter 2 explains how we one might reconstruct the argument for strict adherence without appealing to consequentialism. This presents a final case for denying the reliability of our independent moral judgments. *Chapter 3* explains how Islamic

philosophers dismiss our independent moral judgments through their theological virtue ethics.

It is hard for conscientious modern Muslims to question the reliability of their own independent moral judgments (about slavery, sexism, discrimination against minorities, fairness, etc.). In fact, it is part of the identity of progressive Muslims to maintain their independent moral judgments. But the conclusion of Part I is that we can't simply assume the reliability of our independent moral judgments (despite the fact that many philosophers of religion simply do so). The reliability of our independent moral judgments needs to be *defended*. This is what I undertake to do in Part II, called "Ethics First." An ethics-first solution to the problem of prescribed evil has two goals:

First, it aims to *defend* the reliability of our independent moral judgments against the argument for strict adherence.
Second, it aims to *reconcile* seemingly prescribed evil with our independent moral judgments without renouncing our independent moral judgments.

Part II consists of three chapters. The first two chapters present the case for the reliability of our independent moral judgments. Chapter 4 concerns the (ir)rationality of moral deference to Scripture. I will argue that *even if* we take our independent moral judgments *not* to be *objectively* reliable, *rationality* requires us to act based on our own moral judgments, especially in asymmetrically high-stake situations, that is, in high-stake situations in which we are in the dark about the consequences of following Scripture's injunctions. The chapter presents, then, an unapologetic ethics-first solution to the problem of prescribed evil. According to this solution, while the problem of prescribed evil can be dissolved by withholding judgment regarding the objective reliability of our independent moral judgments, when it comes to our everyday life we rationally ought to act on the basis of our independent moral judgments.

Chapter 5 presents a defense of the reliability of our independent moral judgments. Broadly speaking, there are two ways of viewing morality: philosophical utilitarianism takes facts about happiness as the starting point of morality, whereas the Kantian view holds that morality is about how we will or how we justify ourselves to others. Chapter 5 argues that, if philosophical utilitarianism is accepted, the thesis of the reliability of our independent moral judgments can be justified on the basis of our uncertainty about hidden moral facts and that, if the Kantian view is accepted, the thesis can be

justified on the basis of the inaccessibility of hidden facts. Either way, human morality cannot be affected by hidden moral facts whose existence can only be hinted at by divine means.

Establishing the truth of the reliability of our Independent moral judgments is not adequate to solve the problem of divinely prescribed evil, assuming that the divinity of Scripture and the existence of seemingly prescribed evil are true. Chapter 6 argues that these three theses look inconsistent because of the implicit assumption that actions prescribed or permitted by God are *morally* obligatory or permitted. The inconsistency will be removed once we hold that while actions prescribed or permitted by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage are *legally* obligatory or permitted, according to religious law, they don't need not be morally obligatory or permitted. In fact, a perfect God can be *morally justified* in legislating *legal laws* that deviate from morality. Based on ideas of philosopher Ibn Tufayl, I will suggest an understating of Scriptural injunctions which is compatible with the reliability of our independent moral judgments. This constitutes a second unapologetic solution to the problem of prescribed evil. I will end the book by offering some suggestions for the moral function of Scripture in the modern world.

5. Historical Background

While this monograph is a book in contemporary philosophy of religion and moral philosophy, it involves a fair amount of historical discussion (especially in Part I). The goal of the monograph is to look at history in order to draw from it ideas that can be used to address a pressing problem for our contemporary world. The chapters of Part I begin with a historical discussion of one (or more) important historical figure(s) and end by considering what implication this history has for addressing the problem of prescribed evil. In the chapters of Part II, I will show that the arguments offered either have their roots in the ideas of one (or more) historical figure(s) or are in line with the spirit of their ideas.

Given that the problem of prescribed evil is a general problem in the philosophy of religion, one might wonder why a historically informed solution is valuable. The answer is threefold. First, the relation between revelation and reason is a central topic in Islamic thought. This book is about the relation between revelation and reason in the moral realm. Exploring various ways that Islamic scholars have understood this relation gives us a fundamental

insight into understanding their moral theory and moral epistemology. By connecting the moral theory and moral epistemology of Islamic thinkers to a vexing contemporary problem, I hope that the reader will gain a fresh and contemporary perspective on the history of ethics in Islamic philosophy.

Second, most problems in philosophy are not new. The problem of prescribed evil is not entirely new either. It is true that most of the Islamic philosophers and theologians we discuss in the book did not believe that direct injunctions on ethical matters in the Qur'an had ever pushed *against* our moral intuitions. For them, wife-beating, corporal punishment for theft or adultery, and discrimination against women and sexual minorities, sadly, would have not been morally concerning, and there would be almost no other cases of counterintuitive moral injunctions in the Qur'an. However, the issue of harmony between reason and revelation is a central theme in Islamic thought, and most Islamic thinkers have constructed their theological theories to explain why there is ultimately an agreement between reason and revelation. It is an intellectual mistake to ignore what a rich historical tradition has to offer on a central contemporary problem.

Third, the question of violence and discrimination against women and religious and sexual minorities has a unique importance in our contemporary world, especially when the relation of Islam to violence is concerned. Progressive Muslims today need to be able to understand the problem of prescribed evil, trust their moral intuitions, and find an adequate solution for seemingly questionable injunctions in Scripture. A solution to a central Islamic problem has a better chance of being accepted by the Muslim community if it is informed by the Islamic tradition. This is in part why I present my solution to the problem through critical engagement with the ideas of classic Islamic scholars, and by reconstructing a narrative, grounded in the Islamic tradition, in which the problem is addressed.

While the ultimate goal of the book is to find a historically informed solution to the problem of prescribed evil, a subsidiary goal of the book is to provide a contemporary overview of moral theory and moral epistemology in Islamic thought. I also hope that my historical discussions of moral theory in Islamic thought help the reader to find a deeper insight into the nature of the problem of prescribed evil. Nonetheless, in order to make the book more accessible to readers who are not particularly interested in historical discussions of the Islamic tradition, I provide instructions in *the first note of each chapter* on which sections can be skipped without losing sight of the discussion of the problem of prescribed evil.

Before we proceed to Part I, a very brief historical background for a reader who has no familiarity with the Islamic tradition might be helpful. The cursory historical background I provide here only aims to help the reader to be able to put our discussions into a historical perspective. The reader who is not particularly interested in a very general historical background can skip the rest of the prologue.

Islamic theology is divided into two main schools: the *Muʿtazilites* and the *Ashʿarites*. The Muʿtazilites formed the earliest school of theology in Islamic thought, emerging within a hundred years from the death of the Prophet. It consisted of a group of theologians who called themselves "the upholders of justice and oneness." The creation of the school can be traced back to Wāṣil ibn ʿAtā (699–749) and flourished in Basra and Baghdad. The Muʿtazilites developed a rationalistic theology holding that reason is a new source of religious knowledge. They also argued against divine command theory, holding that there are intrinsic moral properties that can be discovered by reason. The Muʿtazilites were firm advocates of free will, as they believed free will is a necessary condition for moral responsibility.

The main Muʿtazilite figure we will discuss in the book (especially in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5) is Qadi ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Hamadi (935–1025). ʿAbd al-Jabbār is regarded as the culmination of the Muʿtazilite school. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's theological summa, *al-Mughnī*, is the comprehensive handbook of the Muʿtazilite school.

The Muʿtazilite school died out, mainly due to political factors. Earlier caliphs were instrumental for the rise of the Muʿtazilites, but later caliphs oppressed them. There are very few Muslims today who identify themselves as Muʿtazilites. The Muʿtazilites, however, survived in the form of the Imāmiyya school (i.e., the Shia school). The Imāmiyya school adopted many of the Muʿtazilites' views, including their outlook on morality.

The rival school of the Muʿtazilites is the Ashʿarites. The Ashʿarite school of Islamic thought can be seen as a reaction to overly rationalistic views of the Muʿtazilites; it was founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ashʿari (873/874–935/936). The early Ashʿarites espoused divine command theory. They downplayed the role of reason in discovering religious truths. The Ashʿarite school is the dominant school of thought in the Islamic world, and its dominance is, again, partly due to political factors. The great minister of Saljuks, Nizām al-Mulk, established Nizāmiyya universities throughout the Islamic world. The Ashʿarite theology was included in the standard curriculum of the Nizāmiyya universities. The Saljuks helped the Ashʿarite theology to become dominant

across the Islamic empire. Most of the Sunni world today accepts the main Ashʿarite theological doctrines.

The Persian theologian Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1011) is the most prominent Ashʿarite thinker. We discuss his works throughout the book (but especially in Chapter 1). Al-Ghazālī studied under another prominent Ashʿarite thinker, Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (discussed in the same chapter) and became the head of the Baghdad Nizāmīyya University. It is not an exaggeration to say that al-Ghazālī's views become the orthodox Ashʿarite doctrines and influenced the whole Islamic world up until now.

The third school of Islamic thought that we will discuss is the "Philosophers" ("*Falāsifa*"), as they liked to call themselves. They called themselves the philosophers (or *falāsifa*) because they saw their works as a continuation of Greek philosophy. The translation movement started in the mid-eighth century, and from the ninth century onward Muslims found many important philosophical books in Arabic written by Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Already, the rationalistic mood of Islamic theology was set by the Muʿtazilites. When the Greek works were translated into Arabic, Islamic thinkers, under the influence of the Muʿtazilites, regarded reason as a source of knowledge, and found a new and incredibly rich source of knowledge.

Islamic philosophers (*falāsifa*) such as al-Kindi, al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroës took themselves to be developing and perhaps revising the works of Plato and Aristotle. Similar to their predecessors, *falāsifa* spent a large amount of time studying logic, science, and the works of earlier Greek philosophers. The Islamic philosophers were not very concerned about the differences among the views of Greek philosophers; rather, they regarded Greek philosophy as a scientific tradition that could be advanced by careful rational discussion and Islamic insight. Philosophy was considered an accumulative way of acquiring knowledge about the universe. Even though Islamic philosophers such as al-Fārābī and Avicenna sought to make Aristotelian philosophy religion-friendly, their Aristotelian-Platonic views about the nature of reality looked very different from theological views at the time. The Ashʿarite movement was a reaction not only to the rational theology of the Muʿtazilites, but also to overly rationalist views of Islamic philosophers. The Ashʿarites resented the views of Islamic philosophers to the extent that al-Ghazālī claimed some of their views amount to the disbelief in Islam.

Here an important terminological decision is in order. While this might sound strange to our ear, the Muʿtazilites and the Ashʿarites who do not

build their theories on Greek philosophy are not called *philosophers* in the Islamic tradition; instead, they practice *theology* (*kalām*), and they are called theologians (*mutakallimūn*). Al-Ghazālī is a very interesting case in this regard. While al-Ghazālī was certainly very familiar with Greek philosophy (and at times incorporated some of Avicenna's view into his own), he would not call himself a philosopher, given his lack of sympathy for Greek philosophy. Given the way we use the term "philosopher" today, Muʿtazilite and the Ashʿarite theologians would certainly be considered philosophers. However, in harmony with the strange but prevalent use of the term "philosopher" in the Islamic tradition, I will use the term "philosopher" only for *falāsifa*. I will avoid using the term "philosopher" to describe theologians discussed in this book.

The four main Islamic philosophers that we discuss in the book are al-Rāzī (854–925), al-Fārābī (872–950), Averroës (1126–1198), and Ibn Tufayl (1105–1185). Al-Fārābī probably had the most influence on the moral theory of Islamic philosophers. He was closely familiar with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Chapter 3 discusses how al-Fārābī transformed Aristotelian virtue ethics into a theological virtue ethics that set the tone for all of his successors. This virtue ethics is accepted almost universally by his successors, such as Avicenna and Averroës.

We therefore don't discuss Avicenna in the monograph; insofar as we are concerned with the problem of prescribed evil, there is no substantial difference between the moral epistemology of al-Fārābī and that of Avicenna.[30] However, Chapter 3 does briefly discuss Averroës, since his famous essay on the harmony of philosophy and religion is a clear statement of the al-Fārābīan view on the subject.

Two other major Islamic philosophers that we will discuss in Part II are al-Rāzī and Ibn Tufayl. Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī is one of the earliest Islamic philosophers who practiced *falāsifa* under the influence of Greek philosophers. Al-Rāzī is most famous for his medical works. His philosophical works are mostly lost and underappreciated. Even contemporary Islamic philosophers such as al-Fārābī and Avicenna did not engage with al-Rāzī's philosophical works substantively. However, as Chapter 4

[30] See Deborah Black, "Practical Wisdom, Moral Virtue, and Theoretical Knowledge: The Problem of the Autonomy of the Practical Realm in Arabic Philosophy," in *Moral and Political Philosophies in the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. B. Carlos Bazán, Eduardo Andújar, and Leonard G. Sbrocchi, 3 vols. (New York: Legas, 1995), 1:451–65. Black provides evidence that there is no substantial difference between the moral epistemology of al-Fārābī and that of Avicenna.

explains, his nonorthodox attitude toward the function of morality promises a satisfying solution to the problem of prescribed evil.

The other major Islamic philosopher discussed in Part II is Ibn Tufayl. Like al-Rāzī, Ibn Tufayl was also the physician and counselor of the caliph of his age. He cherished Avicenna's works and met young Averroës when he was old (his introducing Averroës to the caliph significantly helped Averroës in his later career). Chapter 6 argues that Ibn Tufayl's philosophical tale *Hayy ibn Haqzān*, opens up a new hermeneutical possibility in interpreting morally controversial passages in Scripture.